

F&P Interview

A Conversation with Honorary
Guild Member Merlyn Troska

MERLYN TROSKA has been a familiar sight around the Fort Vancouver forge for fourteen years now. Merlyn is a founder of the Guild with a long and interesting career in blacksmithing. A perfect person to interview, he's soft-spoken and modest, but still a blacksmith who has been there, done that, and who can probably make a T-shirt out of mild steel.



Merlyn retired from the trade of blacksmithing twenty-six years ago. He started his career in Dawson, North Dakota, and his early formal blacksmith training was at the local agriculture college in Fargo.

After high school, Merlyn joined the CCC, building roads and bridges and sometimes fighting forest fires. His CCC paychecks were only \$5 per month.

Although corps workers earned \$1 a day, \$25 of their \$30 monthly salaries was sent home to parents and family.

Work was difficult to find during the Depression years, so Merlyn migrated south, to San Francisco, where he eventually found a job at the Cordec Manufacturing Company.

His career included an interesting U.S. Army tour during WWII. With typical military efficiency, the army retrained Merlyn as an "army blacksmith" in Atlanta, Georgia. After spending the entire course of training enjoying coffee and doughnuts while other people were learning basic blacksmithing skills, he was shipped off to practice army blacksmithing in the South Pacific, in Panama (working in a marine repair shop), and in the Philippines.

After the army, Merlyn served a formal apprenticeship of three years on the railroad, working eight to sixteen hours a day. Good wages were still hard to find, and although layoffs were common, work could generally be found at another railroad shop. He worked a total of thirty-six years for five different railroads, including the Union Pacific, the Southern Pacific, and the Portland Terminal Railway.

He shared many shop stories about how to iron out bent engine frames and fabricate replacement parts on-site at a train wreck. He also described forging down side rods for locomotives and explained how closely the railroad blacksmith worked with the machinists in the shop. Railroad forge shops sported 3500 to 4000 pound steam hammers that were capable of working 12" x 12" x 8' billets of steel. One of the blacksmith's jobs

was to put tires on the engine driving wheels. The technique is similar to re-tiring a wagon wheel, but the scale is much larger. The tire is heated to cherry red and maneuvered over the wheel. As it cools, the tire shrinks to fit the wheel.

Merlyn is well traveled. He was one of the early visitors to China shortly after it was opened to travel from the U.S. in the late 1970s. Polish (his grandfather was from Krakow), German, and Norwegian heritage drew Merlyn to travel throughout central Europe and Russia. He always makes it a point to visit forging shops wherever he can find them.

Merlyn will be in Arizona from the first of October until April. In Arizona, he will be active with the Renaissance Faire in Apache Junction. Merlyn and Jim Marson maintain the blacksmith shop for the fair and are also training three apprentices, who work along with them. ♦

From Merlyn's Shop Vocabulary

- *To work the tool fire* – to make the tools, e.g., chisels etc.
- *Hammer smith* – the blacksmith who tells the hammer driver what to do; he can direct work at more than one hammer.
- *Hammer driver* —a low paid worker who operated the steam hammer
- *Journeyman blacksmiths*—workmen specialized in making tools, springs and forge welding.

Paul Hinds Celebrates 90!

FAMILY, FRIENDS

and fellow blacksmiths gathered on August 22 to celebrate the odometer turning 90 for Paul. Paul was in fine form, greeting guests



and giving tours of his shop. With the exception of the anvil and some other tools, Paul used his machinist's skills to fabricate all the tools in the shop, including the power hammer, which adds a distinctive industrial character to the forge. We all had a good time, Paul, and thanks for the party. You can count on us to be there for 91! ♦

Tool Making Warm Up

DAVID STEARNS was kind enough once again to pitch in with continuing education. Sunday, September 19, Guild members joined David for a workshop to make the tools be required for the Jay Close Workshop at the Meridian Forge October 29-30. ♦

Jay Close, Close Up

JAY CLOSE was originally inspired in 1975, watching a blacksmithing demonstration at the American Crafts Council show in San Francisco. A couple of years later, he finally had a chance to hold a glowing iron bar in his hand and shape it with a legitimate, cross peen hammer. By that time he was living in eastern Kentucky and was hooked on a variety of hand-work skills including woodcarving and gun-smithing. He pursued these interests along with an industrial arts education degree and

contributed “how to” articles to *Muzzle Blasts* magazine. While in school at Morehead State University, he began working summers as an interpreter in the gunsmith shop at Colonial Williamsburg. In 1986, at the end of his third summer in the yoke, he had a chance to fill in at the Deane Forge blacksmith shop, where Peter Ross was master. The ten-week temporary position extended through the winter, and Jay became a full-time interpreter by the spring and a blacksmith apprentice by the fall of 1987.

At that time, blacksmith operations at Colonial Williamsburg had moved to the Anderson Blacksmith shop. There, Jay completed his apprenticeship and was promoted to journeyman status in 1994. He also retained his interest in early American gun work and taught at the muzzle loading gunsmith workshops sponsored by the NMLRA, initially team teaching with David Wagner, and then teaching his own introductory class on period gun stocking.

JAY CLOSE
WORKSHOP

Guild-Sponsored Jay Close Demonstration

November 5 – 7, 2004

Fort Vancouver Blacksmith Shop

Fee \$20 / day or \$50 for all three days

Sign up sheet in the shop.

Jay has been a demonstrator along with the rest of the Anderson shop crew at three ABANA conferences, including the recent one at Asheville, North Carolina. He has also demonstrated at regional gatherings, like the Potomac Blacksmiths’ Guild Spring Fling, the Alabama Forge Council’s gathering at Tannahill State Park and a

number of NC-ABANA get togethers. Jay has assisted Peter Ross in teaching a class on Baroque English ironwork at the John C. Campbell Folk School. In 2002 he was pleased to be invited as the lead instructor for the Peter Ross Institute of Higher Learning in Portland, Oregon, and demonstrator for the historical smithing program at Fort Vancouver National Historic Site, in Vancouver, Washington.

Jay left CW as 1999 began, but not before completing a project that had intrigued him since 1976: construction of an 18th century printing press. As “job boss” on the project, Jay oversaw construction of two such presses, one for Colonial Williamsburg and the other for the Newseum Museum of the News in Arlington, Virginia. Among the many challenges of such a project that Jay tackled was hand cutting, with hammer, chisel and file, the three-lead screw that forms the heart of the press. The press screw was about 2.5 inches diameter and maybe 5 inches long. The nut was brass and cast in place. I have no idea of its weight, but it would screw itself down propelled by gravity. Altogether, a cool project.

After leaving Colonial Williamsburg, Jay relocated near Charlotte, North Carolina, where he has his own business, mostly doing reproduction 18th-century ironwork for local historic sites and museums. He has, however, teamed with Tal Harris on an extensive architectural ironwork project for a custom home and on work for the Mel Gibson historical film, “The Patriot”.

Among his many talents, Jay has mastered the highland bagpipe and played in several pipe bands.

“I am looking forward to visiting with old friends and making new ones at this year’s class, Jay commented.” ♦

Crossword Solutions

| Across | Down |
|------------|-----------|
| 2. Coke | 1. Tree |
| 5. Ferrule | 2. Chuck |
| 6. Rasp | 4. Slag |
| 7. Tang | 3. Keeper |

Mystery Blacksmith Powers Up for Oregon

THE END OF JULY and first of August saw many Guild members at the Great Oregon Steam Up, at Brooks, Oregon, including a mystery tool fabricator who was demonstrating skills and giving away freebies to smith wannabes.



The Steam Up featured many of the museum's permanent exhibition pieces, as well as an array of steam tractors from private collections. Popular attractions (besides the blacksmith shop) were the Grand Review parade and log sawing at the sawmill. Thanks for being there, folks, and we look forward to the 2005 Steam-Up, July 30-31

and August 6-7. See you there! ♦

A Visit to a Sister Shop

THERE WERE MANY Hudson's Bay Forts. Many of the surviving forts are, naturally enough, in Canada. Perhaps the best preserved is Lower Fort Garry. Approximately 30 miles north of Winnipeg, Manitoba, Fort Garry was originally constructed at the junction of the Assiniboine and Red Rivers in present day Winnipeg. It was subsequently moved north, and renamed Lower Fort Garry. The fort was constructed of stone by Pierre Leblanc under the direction of George Simpson. It

has been restored to a vintage of 1850, not that distant from our own Fort Vancouver.

The blacksmith's shop, one of the later additions to the fort, was reconstructed in 1971. Two university students are employed by Parks Canada to re-enact the role of fort blacksmiths. The shop is smaller than at Fort Vancouver. The forge is supplied with air from a floor-mounted bellows.

With no separation of the public from the workspace, many small noses are at anvil level. ♦



CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Christmas at Fort Vancouver

Saturday, December 11, 2004

9 AM – 4 PM

NWBA 2005 Spring Conference

May 15-17, 2005

Benton County Fairgrounds, Corvallis, Oregon

Don't Just Do It — Read About It!

Book Reviews

Bob Race

ONE CANNOT COME ACROSS TOO MANY BOOKS when doing research on any subject, and there is a large assortment of textbooks on blacksmithing, carpentry, harness making, cooperage, brick making, surgery, medicines — you get the picture. The biggest challenge is to learn enough so that the information you pass on to your fellow interpreters is as near to being correct and reliable as possible. There have been some books that I once thought were the satisfying answers to my quests. However, I found over many years that one should try to apply as much logic as possible to their findings before chiseling the final solution in stone, as some of the earlier books can lead one down the wrong path.

Discussed below are two books of interest for those of you who wish to stay on the narrow path of correct interpretive elements for our visiting tourist and school groups entering a chamber door of any one of our trade shops. There is also a third book which I believe may encourage some of you to branch out into the tool making world of blacksmithing, something that I believe should be more encouraged, as not only does the blacksmith shop want for better tooling, but so does the carpenter shop, kitchen, garden (perhaps wrenches for the Troy-bilt tractor — sorry, couldn't resist that one) and bakery, or whatever may be requested of us to make for any future buildings.

*KHRUSHCHEV'S SHOE and Other Ways to Captivate
an Audience of One to One Thousand*
by Roy Underhill [of The Woodwright's Shop fame]

DEFINITELY FOR THOSE OF YOU who wish to improve your interpretive skills, even though they may already be first rate, you may wish to buy Underhill's book. [I found a copy for only \$8 on the Internet.] It is full of his witticisms, subtle humor, and a myriad of solutions of how to confront a group of people who just came through the timbered porticoes of the Fort.

One of Underhill's laws of communication he calls *Habeas Corpus* is: When people have gone to the trouble to bring their bodies to you, you must do everything that you

*KHRUSHCHEV'S SHOE
And Other Ways to
Captivate an Audience
of One to One Thousand*

Roy Underhill

Perseus Books Group

www.perseusbooksgroup.com

(2002, paper, \$16.50

ISBN 0738206725)

*OUTPOST: McLoughlin
and the Pacific
Northwest*

Dorothy Morrison

Oregon Historical Society,

www.ohs.org

(New edition: December 2004

163 pp., paper, \$35)

*WERK und WERKZEUG
des KUNSTSCHMIEDS:
the Smithy's Craft and
Tools*

Otto Schmirler

Verlag Ernst Wasmuth,

Tübingen, East Germany

U.S. distrib:

www.artisanideas.com

(128 pp., hardbound, \$57 US,

ISBN 3803050405)

can to take advantage of their physical presence. He also comments early in the book that he never works within 50 feet of a horse or a working blacksmith. “You can’t compete with big brown eyes or hammering and sparks.”

So if you not only want to impress your audience, but those next to you, pick up a copy of *Khrushchev’s Shoe* and study Underhill’s advice.

OUTPOST: McLoughlin and the Pacific Northwest
by Dorothy Morrison

THIS MONUMENTAL tome (which I found at my local library) will definitely keep one busy for weeks, unless you are good at speed reading or are just looking for certain references to help you with interpretive seances to those groups who wish to know the small nitty-gritties seldom heard outside the confines of the Fort proper. It is full of pictures and many detailed accounts of McLoughlin’s life and has one of the best sources for references of any biographical book to be published. Although it is a shame that more books of this nature are not surfacing as it is a breath of fresh air and is easy reading for the 480-plus pages of textual matter, 118 pages of notes, and 22 pages of sources, giving a treasury of places to look for more information.

It has vivid accounts of people like the Whitman’s, the Lee’s, the Reverend Beaver, and other prominent names familiar to our ears. There are a few maps, (I wish there were more) and very detailed references to specific items, such as the steamship *Beaver*, and other ships responsible for bringing supplies to the Fort. There is first-hand information covering the small details that may spark the kids’ interest in group participation when they are forced to ask questions. If you are looking for stories for these groups, this is a good resource.

WERK und WERKZEUG des KUNSTSCHMIEDS
The Smithy’s Craft and Tools
by Otto Schmirler

A MUST FOR THOSE WHO ARE SERIOUS about making tools, for it is a glorious picture book of marvelous variations of tools that you will need for fabricating anything in the

“When people have gone to the trouble to bring their bodies to you, you must do everything that you can to take advantage of their physical presence”

“OUTPOST is a breath of fresh air and easy reading . . . a treasury of places to look for more information.”

Fort's shop. Nearly every page of drawn graphics has a scale bar (usually in centimeters: 1 cm = approx. 0.4 in.) so that one can have a close idea as to the dimensions of the tool you wish to make. There are also graphic drawings of how to forge various shapes, make drifts, swages, punches, hammers, tongs, etc. Designs and methods for executing them are so well illustrated in vivid detail that there is little guesswork needed to complete any of the projects displayed on the pages. Although there are some pages of photos, the lined watercolor sketches give the clear definition which will allow one to photocopy any project so that it can be enlarged or reduced to size on a sheet you can take to the shop and not worry about soiling the original source. Also, should any of you have the ambition to make your own treadle hammer, there are plans for building an Oliver on page 99.

NOTE: See sidebar page 5 for price and distribution information. It may also still be available from available from *Norm Larson Books*, 5426 E. Hwy 246, Lompoc, CA 93436. ♦

“Designs and methods for executing them are so well illustrated in vivid detail that there is little guesswork needed to complete any of the projects . . .”

A Few Thoughts from Ted

BEHIND THE SCENES counts! That is, if you are working on a project at home then you are entitled to enter those hours and get credit from the Fort Vancouver Volunteer Staff Coordinator. Some examples: Reading an enlightening book that either helps you improve your blacksmithing and/or interpreting skills counts. Writing an article for the newsletter counts. Helping with the manual counts. Work on your home computer counts, e.g., updating drawings. Attending a blacksmith training seminar counts. Attending a lecture about the history of this area counts. So besides pounding and talking there are lots of opportunities to get recognition at the annual volunteer celebration. Go for it!!! Questions? Ask Ted or Bill DeBerry. ♦

— *Ted Anderson, Guild President*

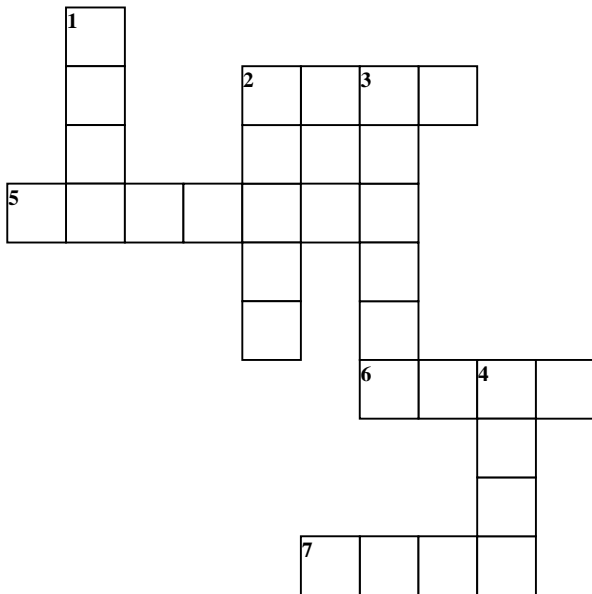
Comments from the Forge

THANKS TO ALL the volunteers for continuing to provide excellent interpretive demonstrations over the past year. I have been compiling statistics for the end of the fiscal year and would like to announce that the blacksmiths donated approximately 4,500 hours of volunteer time since October of last year. This is a tremendous amount of time! Without your efforts, the blacksmith shop would be a sad, static exhibit. Thank you from me and from the park management. See you at the forge (I hope to be in there more during the winter). Don't forget the Jay Close workshop Nov 5, 6, and 7.

Again, thanks for all your efforts and I'll see you at the Forge. ♦

— *Bill DeBerry, Park Ranger/Blacksmith*

Crossword



Blacksmith's Trivia

Whose forge lies under Mt. Saint Helens?

Vulcan, the Roman god who is a blacksmith rather than the patron of blacksmiths, a common misconception.

Down

1. Original shelter for William Canning's forge at the Columbia Depot
2. A clamp screwed on a rotating shaft to fasten tools
3. The part of a door latch through which the latch bolt slides
4. A melted mass of non-combustible matter in coal

Across

2. The substance fresh coal becomes after heat has driven off all elements that give off smoke and a yellow flame
5. A metal ring, cap, or tube-section placed on the end of a handle
6. A coarse file used mostly to grate or tear
7. The part of the tool blank that is locked into the tool handle

Solutions on page 3

THE FORGE & PLANE

is the official newsletter of the Fort Vancouver Craft Guild.

Please send your comments, submissions, and suggestions to

Susan Gawecki, Editor
 17706 NE Homestead Drive
 Brush Prairie, WA 98606
 360-687-5124

If you would like to be added to the electronic distribution list, please send an email request to

msgawecki@comcast.net

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